

Presentation

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The collapse of the early medieval European kingdoms (8th-9th centuries)

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Collapse is an evocative term, conjuring a picture of complete and sudden decadence¹. It is applied to the study of human societies to characterize certain processes from a catastrophist perspective. One example is Jared Diamond's best-seller, which defines collapse as a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time². Diamond stresses the suddenness of the process, and the causality centred on the deterioration of the environment due to wrong choices made by the society's leaders; a kind of unpremeditated ecological suicide or "ecocide". Diamond's study has been fiercely criticized but has succeeded in popularising collapse as a social phenomenon, linking it with present concerns about the relationships between humans and the environment and with the debate on political decisions about such issues.

However, the processes of collapse have long interested economists, anthropologists, archaeologists and historians, who have examined such phenomena in a less simplistic way. Joseph Tainter associated collapse with the rapid, significant loss of an established level of sociopolitical complexity in a society³. It was essentially a sociopolitical process with deep consequences in other fields, but whose effects should not be dramatized. Tainter points up that the breakdown of authority and centralized control, typical traits of collapse, do not necessarily mean regression to an inferior state⁴. On the contrary, the disappearance of the political institutions is combined with the maintenance of a "great tradition". This means that cases of total collapse of a civilization are extremely rare⁵. Loyalties change, political and social balance is altered, production and culture are transformed, but traditions, languages

¹ Middleton, *Nothing lasts forever*, pp. 259-260.

² Diamond, *Colapso*, p. 23.

³ Tainter, *The collapse*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁵ Yoffee, *Orienting*, p. 15; Cowgill, *Onward and upward*; Strickland, *Testing collapse*, pp. 15-16.

and forms of agriculture survive, so the past is not totally erased. On the other hand, the construction of a discourse about collapse was meaningful for the elites arising out of a major transformation, as thanks to the image of a dark age, they were able to legitimate themselves⁶.

The study of the processes of collapse supported a better understanding of the ways through which political structures worked in past societies. Contrasting with the evolutionary paradigm, collapses show how sociopolitical complexity did not follow a straight path. Equally, the transformations that are seen should not envisaged as a kind of pathology affecting imperfect states; on the contrary, they can be understood within the normal behaviour of pre-industrial polities, where the impulses coming from the centre are not constant, which allows significant agency to groups located on the periphery⁷.

One frequently point of discussion is the causality of these collapses. Studies highlighting the most catastrophic features of the phenomenon tend to seek ultimate causes, which may be found in invasions, the explosion of powerful internal tensions and other motives. The cause most frequently cited is an environmental one, triggered by small changes in the climate and which societies were unable to resolve. The recent study of eastern Mediterranean in the tenth and eleventh centuries by Ronnie Ellenblum is a good example⁸. In other cases, the evidence of climate change and environmental deterioration may have worked as just another factor within a wider set of causes that exacerbated internal tensions and led to the collapse of the sociopolitical system, as it happened in the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Bronze Age⁹.

However, this explanatory model has received numerous criticisms. The available evidence is often local and does not allow an extrapolation to a larger scale, and additionally it can be difficult to identify the traits of environmental degradation correctly. At the same time, the view of the relationship between human societies and the environment underpinning these interpretations may be too simplistic. It is clear that climate change is a challenge for any human society, especially in the case of societies on a low technological level, but the key lies in the response to the new conditions. And this response will be found in the sociopolitical structures that move within a cultural framework that conditions them. Environmental changes are critical for sustainability, but their relationships with human societies are filtered by a complex network of social responses¹⁰. Collapse may have many causes, and they will be different in every case, but the central axis always lies in sociopolitical relations.

⁶ Renfrew, *Approaches*, pp. 386-389.

⁷ Mann, *Las fuentes*, pp. 65-66; Yoffee, *Orienting*, pp. 12-13; Yoffee, *Myths*, pp. 138-139.

⁸ Ellenblum, *The collapse*.

⁹ Drake, *The influence of climatic change*; Langgut, Filkenstein and Leach, *Climate and the Late Bronze collapse*. A more complex perspective in Cline, 1177. Other studies rule out the role of the environment in these changes: Dickinson, *El Egeo*.

¹⁰ Butzer and Endfield, *Critical perspectives*.

Collapse equally has many consequences: a decline in population, decrease in trade, changes in productive models, disappearance of ideological systems and political institutions, increase in social and military conflicts, and so on. The problem is that to a large extent these processes cannot easily be traced because they are negative evidence; the absence of something. Some of the phenomena may be widespread enough to be indicative of collapse; for example a halt in monument-building and maintenance of public works, loss of long-distance trade, and on a smaller scale, the disappearance of craft specialization¹¹. These are significant features because they enable a more accurate interpretation of the consequences of collapse. In short, two kinds of transformation can be perceived. The first one refers to the values, institutions and relations associated with elites as they were the ones who sponsored the building of monuments, who acquired most goods in long-distance trade and also the ones who guided production, directly or indirectly, through their demand. Another aspect that is not specifically archaeological may be added: a decrease in the role of writing, as it is elites' needs that drive the expansion of writing¹². It is in this field where we find the main indicators of a change that might be considered catastrophic, due to the powerful and complex link between elites and political structures. As sociopolitical structures seem to be the parts that are most volatile and susceptible to change in societies, the transformations affecting elites are the most evident and sudden¹³. The second kind of transformation affects local communities and especially peasant groups. The impact of political structures is less important here and the changes that are detected do not need to be assessed negatively. Thus, transformations in productive processes may be the result of adaptation to the new conditions and should not automatically be assessed in negative terms.

The changes should be framed within the concept of resilience, the capacity of adaptation in a social system to absorb alterations and continue functioning. The study of collapses shows that human resilience is much stronger than the processes of decreasing complexity¹⁴. The emphasis of resilience and adaptation, rather than the image of desolation, is also associated with regeneration: the reappearance of complex societies. The starting point of regeneration is the resilience of the population that does not form part of the elite and the opportunities arising out of the new framework of relationships. However, these societies have not made a completely new start, as the permanence of small-scale units and of prior ideologies and values are the points of reference of regeneration¹⁵. In this way, collapse and transfor-

¹¹ Strickland, *Testing collapse*, pp. 121-128.

¹² Goody, *The logic of writing*; Middleton, *Nothing lasts forever*, p. 265.

¹³ Butzer, *Collapse, environment*, pp. 3637-3638.

¹⁴ Redman, *Resilience theory*; McAnany and Yoffee, *Why we question collapse*, pp. 10-11; Middleton, *Nothing lasts forever*, p. 259.

¹⁵ Schwartz, *From collapse*, pp. 7-10.

mation are two sides of the same coin and therefore interpretations that are too catastrophist should be avoided¹⁶.

This background will help to understand the processes of political collapse that happened in the early Middle Ages. In the eighth and ninth centuries, several kingdoms disappeared (Visigoths, Lombards, Mercia and the Frankish empire) in what might be seen as a symptom of weakness of political structures or general instability. However, this situation should be understood as another trait of early medieval political structures. While historical accounts have highlighted the failure of these kingdoms, which is evident given their disappearance, a more nuanced approach is able to study them from other perspectives. Early medieval kingdoms were basically groups of aristocrats in association around the figure of a king who guaranteed loyalty by redistributing properties, rights and prestige. They were systems that affected very small – but very influential – groups of elites and their impact on local societies was much more limited in general. Consequently, when the centre of power became seriously threatened, the risk of collapse was very high, whereas local societies possessed ways of adaptation. Collapse was not necessarily a disaster for the whole society, but only for members of the inner groups of power who lost out in the political game. Other social groups were able to reinvent their identity and the rules of the game to adapt to the new situation.

This conception is simply a general reflection that poses new questions, but it could be discussed. How did the relations between monarchy and aristocracy work? Can early medieval kingdoms be defined as states? What was the effective influence of the political structures of the royal entourage on local societies? Were local societies (and many of the elites) able to survive without a state or without the royal court and patronage? What happened to the institutions and people who had wielded effective power before the collapse? Were new formulas of political articulation created after the collapse? What happened to the previous identities? Did new political identities create?

An international symposium about these questions was held at Salamanca on 22th-23rd October 2015 within the activities of the research project *Colapso y regeneración política en la Antigüedad Tardía y la Alta Edad Media: el caso del Noroeste peninsular*, “Collapse and political regeneration in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages” (Ref. HAR2013-47780-C3-1-P). The studies presented there are the papers of this monographic section of «Reti Medievali - Rivista». They do not aim to cover all experiences, but succeed in examining the forms adopted by early medieval political structures through the study of the circumstances of their disappearance. In all cases, a picture arose that did not envisage these polities from the point of view of a supposed failure, as if they had been structurally doomed to collapse. Instead, the studies highlighted the complexity and fluidity of early medieval political realities. In this context, one crucial need is the reinterpretation of the sources and the

¹⁶ Middleton, *Nothing lasts forever*, p. 265.

historiography that emphasised destruction and failure, a discourse that did not arise impartially but as a way to vindicate sociopolitical positions, both in the past and in the present.

The aim was not to reach a common explanation, which may even be impossible, but a common point of view. Even the experiences are clearly disparate. In this way, processes that can be understood in “Tainterian” terms of collapse were studied, such as the end of the Visigothic kingdom in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula, examined by Iñaki Martín Viso in a text that links directly with the paper by Pablo de la Cruz Díaz and Pablo Poveda, and the case of Great Moravia, even though it is debatable whether it is really possible to speak of a state (but at least of a complex structure), as Maddalena Betti accurately points out. However, other situations do not completely match this picture. That is the case of the Lombard kingdom, presented by Stefano Gasparri, as its end affected mainly identities and the construction of a discourse justifying a situation in which the role of the kings in local societies was possibly very intense. Also Mercia, studied by Charles Insley, disappeared through a combination of Viking attacks and the influence of the Wessex dynasty; while it cannot be said that complexity decreased, a situation of collapse can be imagined. The end of the Carolingian empire, referred to in the studies of Giuseppe Albertoni, Igor Santos Salazar and Charles West, would have coincided with social change that, for the “mutationist” school, would not have been reflected in a political change, as the “public” structures survived. As these were much weaker, the central power would finally have failed, which gave rise to feudal society, characterised in terms of regression, which brings to mind a different situation from collapse. The three studies, framed from different perspectives and regions, repeat the idea of a change that was not too drastic and stress the resilience of regional groups of aristocrats. However, in the case of the paper of Igor Santos Salazar, the discussion is not about a kingdom as a whole, but he works in a regional frame, Tuscany, with the particularity of a strong continuity. The monographic issue ends with a concluding text written by Julio Escalona comparing all the examples in a more general view.

Before finishing, I would like to thank all the participants in this issue for their work and courtesy in coming to Salamanca and submitting their text on time. I would also like to thank everyone who made the Salamanca meeting possible, especially Alberto Martín Esquivel and Rosa M^a Quetglas Munar, who were in charge of the administration. Last but not least, I want to acknowledge all the members of the editorial committee of «Reti Medievali - Rivista», colleagues and, above all, friends.

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